

# Witness to the Era: Egypt in the Mid-Twentieth Century<sup>1</sup>

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## Absrtact

Egypt was the true crossroads in which all the forces of the time met. Since the expedition of Napoleon. Bonaparte in 1798 to the present day, it has always been the privileged place where wills, ideas and stakes clash. Atmosphere of tension due to three main factors: the. disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and Mustafa's coup de force. Kamal Atatürk; the pervasive penetration of Western ideas into Egyptian society; and finally the different reactions of the. Egyptians themselves, shared between the Western model,. attachment to Islamic values and the desire to reactivate the. national heritage (thurat).

**Keywords:** Egypt - Ottoman Empire - Western Ideas - National Heritage - Western Model

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## Introduction

Sayyid Qutb Ibrahim Husayn Shadhili was born on October 9, 1906, in a village called Musha, also known as Sheikh 'Abd al-Fattah village. This village is located in the relatively underdeveloped province of Asyut in Upper Egypt. His family was pious with a paternal Indian ancestry named 'Ubayd Allah. His father, Qutb Ibrahim, a rural notable and small indebted landowner, was affiliated with the National Party of Mustafa Kamil and hosted party meetings at home around the magazine *Liwa'* (Banner). His mother, a devout woman, came from a well-known family. Sayyid Qutb was the eldest of five children, Nafisa, Amina, Muhammad, and Hamida, who shared his same opinions, as can be seen in the collective work: *Al-Atyaf Al-Arba'a* (The Four Ghosts). Qutb's education began at the age of six (1912) when his parents chose to send him to a modern primary school (madrasah) instead of a traditional Quranic school (kuttah); however, it is said that he memorized the entire Quran by himself, which he knew entirely by the age of ten. In his biography *"Tifl min al-qaryah"* (Child of the Village), one can observe the contradictory forces of tradition and modernity in Egyptian society, which contributed to shaping his personality and worldview. However, one is also struck by the profound impact of traditional life on Sayyid Qutb's spirit and worldview, by the significant space he devotes in his biography to popular religious practices, his Islamic education, and the customs of his village. Similarly, it is observed that at a very young age, Qutb acquired mastery of traditional Arab-Muslim culture, such as memorizing the Quran and excellent knowledge of the Arabic language, factors that paved the way for him to be a prominent member in the world of literature (*'alam udaba*) between 1920 and 1940. Sayyid succeeded in school, and by 1918, his father decided to send him to Cairo to learn a sufficiently lucrative trade in order to be able to redeem the family heritage gradually disposed of by his father. "Many of those who attend schools (madaris), primary and secondary schools in provincial capitals, students of religious institutes dependent on al-Azhar, civil servants, and officers belong to this class of *afandiyyas* (originally prestigious Ottoman title); from it emerged the great men of contemporary Egypt: 'Abduh, Zaghlul, Nahas Pasha, Taha Hussein." The months of the nationalist revolution of 1919 in Cairo postponed his settlement until 1921.<sup>2</sup>

In 1921, he fled the narrow horizon of traditional life in his village to migrate to his journalist uncle Ahmed Hussein 'Uthman, known as Ahmed al-Mushi, in the southern suburb of Cairo where he hoped to benefit from opportunities in the fields of education and employment.<sup>3</sup> At that time, Qutb had acquired the idea of the separation of religion and literature, which would be expressed in his writings in the 1930s and 1940s, as he declared in his work *"Muhimat al-Sha'ir fi al-Hayat"* (The Mission of the Poet in Life) that "literature is the means that brings us closer to the ideal and that the foremost quality of any writer is to have a philosophy of his own, through which he interprets life."

<sup>2</sup> Guenad Mohammed, « Lecture sur la vie d'un Maître à penser de l'Islam contemporain : Sayyid Qutb The Maghreb Review, Volume 30, n°2-4, 2005, pp.175-197.

<sup>3</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Tifl min al-Qaryah*, Dâr al-Hikma, p.87, Khalidî -al, 1991, p.25-72.

losely associated with 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad (1899-1964), the leader of the new school of modern poetry, the Diwan. In an autobiography, Qutb explains how during his childhood, his ambition had been to join the middle-class layers of the *afandiyyas*, whose members were mostly civil servants, teachers, and employees. He seems to have interrupted his studies for more than a year due to health reasons before joining the 'Abd al-Aziz Teachers' Training School in 1922, and then being admitted in 1929 to Dar al-'Ulum (House of Sciences).<sup>4</sup>

He distinguished himself as a devoted disciple of al-'Aqqad and a staunch advocate of the latter's conception of poetry and criticism. His reputation as a young and promising literary critic had already been firmly established at Dar al-'Ulum, following the publication of an essay on "The Tasks of the Poet in Life and the Poetry of the Present Generation" (*Muhimmât al-Sha'ir fi al-Hayat wa-shi'r al-Jil al-Hadir*) in 1932. Upon graduation, he published a collection of poems, "Al-Shati' Al-Majhul" (The Unknown Beach, 1933).<sup>5</sup>

Qutb participated in the literary battle between al-'Aqqad and Sadiq al-Rifai and their supporters, reproaching al-Rifai and his supporters, such as Mahmud Muhammad Shakir, 'Ali al-Tantawi, Sa'id al-'Iryan, for their unrealism in an article published in 1938 in *al-Risala*. Qutb succeeded in fulfilling his ambition. After obtaining his diploma in 1933 from Dar al-'Ulum, he was hired the same year by the Ministry of Education as a teacher at al-Dawudiyya Primary School (1933-1935), then in Dimyat (1935), and in Bani Suwayf (1935-1936); and finally in Helwan (1936-1940) where he settled with his mother, sisters, and brother. After over six years as a teacher, on March 1, 1940,<sup>6</sup> he was transferred to the Ministry of Education in Cairo, where he served as an advisor on cultural matters until 1944; then as a primary education inspector.

In 1939, in response to Tahā Husayn's famous "European" essay on Egyptian culture, Qutb wrote a "Critique of the Book: The Future of Culture in Egypt" (*Naqd kitāb Mustaqbal al-thaqāfa fi Miṣr*). In these texts, the quest for the meaning of experience takes the form of a reflection on individual and artistic creativity, which appears to him as an ideal for realizing one's vocation by man. In doing so, he continued his literary criticism research: "The Imagery Style of the Quran" (*Al-Taswīr al-Fannī fi al-Qur'ān*, 1945), which he extended in 1947 with a literary study of the Resurrection Testimonies in the Quran (*Mashāhid al-Qiyāmah fi al-Qur'ān*). In his works, he derives from the analysis of Quranic expression itself a theory of

<sup>4</sup> Discussion que Sayyid Qutb a eue avec Nadawî, voir Nadawî Abû al-Hassein ; *Mémoire d'un touriste d'Orient arabe*, 2.éd, Beyrouth, 1975, p.153.

<sup>5</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Tifl min al-Qaryah*, p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *al-Atyâf al-Arba'a*, Beyrouth, 1967, p.122-123.

literary creation, based on what he designates as *al-tajārib al-shu'ūriyya* (emotional experience), *al-tadhawwq al-fitrī* (instinctive taste), or *al-takhayyul al-hissī* (sensory imagination).<sup>7</sup>

He also engaged in tales and autobiographical novels about his native village: "The Four Ghosts" (*Al-atyâf al arba'a*), 1945, in collaboration with his sisters and brother; "A Child from the Village" (*Tifl min al-qarya*), 1946, a novel dedicated to Taha Hussein, where he depicts a young teacher who embarks on a crusade against prevalent superstitions and even organizes, with his students, a quasi-police investigation to scientifically demonstrate that the reputed djinns inhabiting a haunted house are actually just rabbits that have taken shelter there; "The Enchanted City" (*Al-madīna al-mashūra*), 1946; "Thorns" (*Ashwāk*), 1947, an (unhappy) love novel where Qutb portrays the heartbreaking choice that the hero must make to sacrifice the love of a childhood companion in order to fulfill his literary vocation. Additionally, his final literary critique chronicle: "Books and Personalities" (*Kutub wa shakhsiyyât*), 1946, which notably expresses his break with 'Aqqad and his movement, confirmed in his final synthesis, whose aims are scholarly: "Foundations and Methods of Literary Criticism" (*Al-naqd al adabī: usūsuh wa-manâhijuh*), 1948.

In the same year, he published his article "Madārīsa li al-Sukht" (Schools Subject to Abomination), which can be considered the effective beginning of his orientation towards Islamic ideology, as he critiques the political, economic, and social situation in Egypt, calling on Muslim believers to do something for general reform, saying that the Quran requires it according to the verse: "Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity."

Alongside this public output, he submitted reports on education and reform projects to his superiors and to the Ministry of Public Instruction. All of this seems to have prompted them to send him abroad on a specialized scholarship to the United States for modern pedagogy and psychology from 1948 to 1951. He retained his position at the ministry until he resigned in October 1952, a few months after the Free Officers'<sup>8</sup> coup, in protest against what he claimed were non-Islamic government education policies.

Throughout his training period and especially during his employment at the ministry, Qutb was, in the interwar period, an active member of Egyptian secular nationalism, as a social commentator and literary figure.

Several factors in Qutb's background made him receptive to the nationalist movement. His father's support for al-Hizb al-Watani (the first major nationalist organization in Egypt), <sup>9</sup>along with his

<sup>7</sup> Musallam A, Sayyid Qutb's View of Islam, Society and Militancy, *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. XXII, n° 1, Fall 1998, p.65 ; Aussi du même auteur *al-Baht 'an al-Dhât fī 'Ālam mutharib* (lecture dans la vie de Sayyid Qutb), éd, Emerezian, Jérusalem, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Ayrout Henry. H, *Mœurs et coutumes des fellahs*, éd. Payot, Paris 1938, p.48.

<sup>9</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Muhimat al-Shâ'ir fī al-hayât* (la mission du poète dans la vie), Beyrouth, p.15, 22.

native village, Musha's participation in the 1919 uprising against the British, encouraged him from a young age to look beyond the traditional network of family and village solidarity to envision a broader conception of the nation.

Later, after his arrival in Cairo, his abilities to "imagine" the Egyptian nation were strengthened by his experiences in the capital's educational institutions. These provided him with the opportunity to forge connections with many other educated and politically savvy *afandiyya* in this country who were engaged in various processes of social and economic change.

As beneficiaries of modernization, Qutb and his colleagues generally applauded the rapid impetus that had reached even rural Egyptians in the early decades of the 20th century, including changes in the structure of the state and the economy. However, they showed much less enthusiasm regarding the process of cultural Westernization (*tafarnuj*), which was favored by the semi-independent (monarchical) parliamentary regime and its intellectual wing. In particular, they did not appreciate developments that degraded the values associated with gender relations, family, and traditional bonds of social solidarity. One almost certain reason for Qutb's aversion to Western culture was the profound influence that religion and customs had on him. The scattered references in his published works suggest that, beneath the Western veneer, the modern attachments and education he received, Qutb was a traditionalist whose cultural sensitivities were rooted in the world of rural Egyptian *Aryaf*. Given this preexisting identity structure, it might have been natural for Qutb to be hesitant about the cultural aspects of Western civilization.

But perhaps there was another decisive factor, linked to the political and economic crises Egypt faced in the 1930s and 1940s, which not only slowed popular support for the ruling classes but also increased the awareness among *Afandiyya* (like Qutb) of the political implications of culture. The result was the apparent inability of Egyptian politicians to satisfy the nationalist aspirations that spread among the people during the anti-British struggle of 1919-1922, aspirations that remained deeply rooted in the years leading up to World War II.<sup>10</sup> The regime was seen as failing to rid Egypt of British influence in its internal affairs and to bridge the gap between the wealthy landowning classes that dominated parliament and the mass of poor peasants and city dwellers, whose condition was worsening.

Many educated young people saw their dreams of social advancement shattered by rising unemployment and felt the domination of foreigners over the Egyptian economy. In the view of many Egyptians, professional careers, livelihoods, and national dignity were plundered by a system mired in

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<sup>10</sup> Musallam A, *Ibid*, p.66.

endless negotiations with the British, in self-interested (corrupt) economic policies, and in the fierce internal struggles of parliamentarians.<sup>11</sup>

Like many nationalist Afandis, Qutb valued Arabic linguistics and Islamic religious traditions from Egypt's heritage to affirm that part of himself inherited from past generations and to enable him to challenge political legitimacy with conviction. In a flurry of articles written from the late 1930s to the mid-1940s, Qutb explained how Egypt's cultural traditions instilled in the Egyptian people spiritual dispositions that sharply contrasted with what Qutb saw as the materialistic and aggressive nature of Western nations and those of the colonial world following the same path. In order to protect Egypt from the destructive effects of contemporary Western civilization, Qutb urged his compatriots to educate themselves about their cultural roots and to modernize in a way that remained faithful to the essence of indigenous Egyptian culture, rather than imitating Western oppressors. As Qutb succinctly stated in 1946: "The essential question for me concerns my honor, my language, and my culture."

With this purpose in mind, in the period following World War II, Qutb expressed a negative opinion regarding nations like Great Britain and France, his usual targets; this extended to include Americans. He was particularly upset by America's growing support for the Zionist cause in Palestine, which he viewed as a manifestation of European imperialism. He wrote in *Al-Risâla* about feeling aggrieved by the role of President Truman of the United States in the 1946 Investigation Commission, which strongly recommended allowing 100,000 European Jewish refugees to enter Palestine and for a unitary Palestinian state to be created for them. Qutb stated that he would not be surprised if Britain had a hand in these recommendations: after all, Egyptians had a long and intimate knowledge of British diplomatic machinations and their utter disregard for the rights of the Egyptian nation.

However, he admitted to being surprised by America's eagerness to implement a policy he sensed favored Zionist Jews<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, America's refusal to support the creation of an independent Palestine demonstrates that its attitude towards Eastern countries does not differ from that of the English, French, or Germans. In Qutb's view, America supports risky ventures<sup>13</sup>, like Zionism, because, just like other Western nations, its leaders and people lack transcendent moral consciousness (*al-dhamîr*), a trait that Qutb considered essential for just and responsible conduct of human activity, both in public and private realms.

In line with populist and communalist expressions worldwide, Qutb's cultural nationalism was a flexible, change-friendly discourse. In early 1948, Qutb begins to express his nationalist sentiments by

<sup>11</sup> Khalidî -al, *Sayyid min al-milâd ilâ al-istishhâd* (Sayyid Qutb: de la naissance au martyr) Dâr al-Qalam, Damas 1991, p.100; Musallam A, *Prelude to Islamic Commitment: Sayyid Qutb's Literary and Spiritual Orientation, 1932-1938*, The Muslim World (Hartford), n°80, 1990, p.176-189.

<sup>12</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Tifl min al-Qaryah*, p.187-93; Gershoni et Jankowski, *Defining the Egyptian Nation*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.11.

<sup>13</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *bayna al-Aqqâd wa al-Râfi'i*, *al-Risâla*, n°251, p.694.

heavily emphasizing the Quran, whose content is reshaped into a theological discussion around the contemporary Egyptian context of political and social tensions, specifically the condition of class division and inequalities that existed nationally. In this regard, he referred to the Quranic social ideal of mutual social responsibility (*al-takâful al-ijtimâ'î*). Without Qutb's personal explanation, it is difficult to account for this "turn" towards political engagement, the role of Islam in society, as opposed to purely cultural engagement. According to Yvonne Haddad, we can assume that Qutb adopted an Islamist approach, which called for a political and legal order inspired by the Quran, in response to the ongoing political crisis in Egypt.

In this perspective, Qutb would have participated in the opposition of the late 1940s, seeking an ideological solution for Egypt's failing economic and political order. While some Egyptians gravitate towards "leftist" movements (such as the Democratic Movement for National Liberation) and alternatives to the discredited liberal system of the Egyptian government, Qutb leans towards the discourse of Islam, already reasonably well articulated by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

However, it is clear that Qutb progressively adopted an Islamist position and initially tended to support the secular concept of national difference (which had dominated his writings since the 1930s) rather than replace it. Despite his strong appeal to scriptural and prophetic authority,<sup>14</sup> Qutb's primary interest remained the same: to enhance the identity of a virtual nation against different and competing models (*alter egos*) of the West.

The continuity of this objective is evident in the first part of Qutb's first major work on Islam, "Social Justice in Islam" (*al-'Adâla al-Ijtimâ'iyya fî al-Islâm*), published in 1949. In this writing, he reminds Egyptians of their "spiritual capital and intellectual heritage" and urges them not to borrow from abroad what they already possess at home. But it is also evident in Qutb's observations and judgments concerning life in the United States, formed in the context of his study mission to that country, that he continued the process of constructing the Orient and the West as two asymmetrical entities.

As several observers have noted, it was not until the mid-1950s, when Qutb became a political prisoner, that he began to employ rigorously theocentric ideas that made him famous as an Islamist ideologue, without resorting to cultural comparisons.

Qutb's execution, however, had the opposite effect of its intended purpose. Instead of eliminating the threat of Sayyid Qutb's revolutionary thought, the execution added a new "martyr" and a new name to the list of Muslim revivalists of this century, such as Hasan al-Bannâ in Egypt<sup>15</sup>, Abû al-'Ala al-Mawdûdî in Pakistan, and 'Alî Sharî'atî in Iran. The importance of Qutb's thought is evidenced by the new edition and

<sup>14</sup> Ce que conteste S. Akhavi; mais le dossier de Sayyid Qutb aux archives du ministère de l'éducation égyptienne sous le n°12-21/5, indique qu'il était recruté comme professeur à l'école al-Dâwûdiya du Caire le 2 décembre 1933 pour un salaire mensuelle de six livres, pendant deux ans; Voir 'Abd al-Bâqi, Sayyid Qutb, p.28, 30, 43. Aussi Musallam A, al-Baht 'an al-Dhât fî 'Âlam mutharib (lecture dans la vie de Sayyid Qutb), éd, Emerezian, Jérusalem, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Abd al-Bâqi, Sayyid Qutb, p.28; Khâlidî -al, Ibid, p.19.



translation of his works into many languages, and the interest in his commentary and the publication of several books and articles dealing with his life and thought.

Indeed, Qutb's writings have become an integral part of the Islamic revival (al-ba'th al-islâmî) in the last thirty years, drawing much of its strength, among other things, from the inability of Arab regimes to establish stable societies based on social justice.

The real evil afflicting Muslim societies does not come from Islam but from their politics. This evil persists as long as politics is not a space for the convergence of all energies and creative initiatives, where everyone can express themselves, be heard, as a member of a community.

The violence experienced by the Arab citizen from the Maghreb to the East is the result of authoritarian, clientelistic powers, chronic poverty, coupled with accelerated population growth, significant unemployment among a youth majority under 30, as well as a still prevalent illiteracy, deficient schooling that poorly meets market needs, a notable absence of creativity and support for innovation, a difficult breakthrough for democracy and freedom of thought, a subordinate role for women, the difficulty of reforming Islam, closed in a traditional interpretation. This endemic underdevelopment alone explains the maintenance of extremism:<sup>16</sup> Behind the myth of the effectiveness of violence lies the incapacity to implement a legitimization process of power. Changing this attitude requires societies to have more confidence in themselves, and for the political elite to also have more confidence in societies' ability to educate, learn, communicate, and act.

And to break free from this cycle of violence, there must be plurality, dialogue, and Arab-Muslim societies must reject the model of personal and personalized power, omnipresent at all levels where authority is exercised, and build a structured power where the institution surpasses the individual. For this, democracy must be a constant value politically, economically, and socially. This invitation to adopt plurality does not mean abandoning our heritage and cultural particularity or rushing towards materialistic civilization. Rather, it means openness and accepting the other with an open heart.

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<sup>16</sup> Abd al-Bâqi, Sayyid Qutb, p.43.